

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Does Social Media Harm Our Culture?

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, August 1st, 2018

Here's a disturbing story that you might remember hearing on the news: It's about the death of a rapper. Lil Peep had a show coming up at The Rock in Tucson, AZ. Before the show, he posted a video of himself on Instagram popping five Xanax on the tour bus. Xanax is Lil Peep's drug of choice. Only it turns out the drug wasn't pure Xanax; it was laced with Fentanyl. Hours later, Lil Peep died of an accidental Fentanyl overdose, but not before millions of fans had witnessed him taking the pills on Instagram.

Recovery Centers of America calls this a story of [depression, drug addiction, and social media culture](#). Now social media "culture" involves an inside look at a rapper popping Xanax before a show. In this case, it was an inside look at a tragic and heart-rending death. Lil Peep suffered from depression and suicidal ideation. He shared this struggle intimately with his Instagram followers, as well with his fans through his lyrics.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnGbmL_lc-s

When I think about music culture alongside the lives of troubled musicians who self-medicate their struggles, I think about two different things: the music, and the personal life of the musician. Although many musicians have given us frank depictions of their drug use in songs, the song has a life of its own.

When it takes the form of art or music or recipes or books or film, people transmit culture because it's a separate, living, breathing entity. Regardless of who wrote the book — and what drugs the author was on when they wrote it — the book establishes its own place in the culture. That's what makes culture indelible. It's independent of the creators.

Now, with social media culture, that line is blurred — at least, it is for now. Lil Peep's lifestyle, his drug use, addiction, and death are right there with his songs and lyrics. When I look up "Lil Peep," a video of him taking Xanax will appear alongside links to his songs.

I'm not trying to say we don't discuss the lives of cultural contributors when we talk about their art and craft. We love to drudge up the personal details — it's natural. But there's still a distance; there's the contributor, and then there's the contributor's work. I'm saying social media culture can rob us of that distance. For fans of Lil Peep who followed him on Instagram, do the songs live free? Or are they forever connected directly to the personal details and untimely death of a person suffering from depression?

Depends on What You Mean By “Culture”

What is culture? Does social media help us share culture, express ourselves, and appreciate other cultures for what they really are? Or, when it comes to culture, is social media disingenuous? Are we missing something? Is this a cheap substitute for true cultural transmission?

A quick search reveals two differing definitions. Wikipedia says culture is the “social behavior and norms found in human societies.” Sounds about right. Dictionary.com says culture is “the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively.” That sounds a little bit closer to what I was talking about. It seems to ring equally true next to Wikipedia. Merriam-Webster’s first go-to is “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.” No mention of arts there, but you could classify artistic expression as a social form.

You could classify social media as a social form, too. You first learn about this stuff in school. For kiddos, there are no forms or constructs when it comes to social life. There are merely words and actions that achieve a certain end: When you’re hungry, you say “I’m hungry,” and when you’re bored, you make a funny sound or poke your neighbor. You hang out with certain people because you’re inexpressibly drawn to them, or they just so happen to be in your group. You’re not looking at what all this amounts to — what it *means* — from the outside. School forces you to analyze and understand culture. So the transmission of something bigger than yourself begins.

There’s an ongoing debate about [whether social media belongs in classrooms](#), and one of the arguments against it is that it doesn’t help kids participate in “the real world.” This argument seems to be saying that real culture doesn’t exist on social media — it’s a proxy at best, a cheap imitation of social interaction, a forum manipulated by its users and the companies trying to make money off of its users.

A study of millennials revealed that [social media culture](#) — in which #goals are everywhere — is creating motivational conflicts that lead to depression. Some people aren’t accomplishing serious long-term goals because instant gratification and the need to satisfy the self is getting in the way.

Even now, as I look at my Facebook feed, one of my friends asks, “What are the lessons people most often learn too late in life?” The response with the most engagement is, “Don’t hold onto things that don’t serve you. Whether it be a job, a relationship, a house. Know your worth. And always strive for the best.”

But what if that house, job, or relationship is part of your original long-term goal? This is a perfect encapsulation of social media culture. Relationships are “things.” You are more important than your relationships. You are worth something. But if you get no responses, no likes, what are you worth?

A culture characterized by sound bites. Snippets. An entire life, captured there on the screen, as if the human is the work of art, the human being is the cultural artefact, the human is the *product* of culture.

I’m not denying humans are products of the cultures in which we live. But if social media is a culture, and we are products of it, then someone can just keep scrolling. You don’t need to hold onto someone/something that doesn’t serve *you*. Eventually, a funny cat video will pop up, and it will serve to make you laugh.

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